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THE BIBLE, THE GREEKS, AND ORAL ENGLISH

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This is the story of a social movement with disciplinary implications in English usage. On the cultural side it introduced the students who participated to relative intimacy with the racial temperaments, ideals, and geniuses of the ancient Hebrews and Greeks, and to a quickened appreciation of how these two great streams of influence out of the past are playing in numberless ways upon the contemporary world. From a more practical angle it issued in better reading—more apprehensive, discriminating, and interpretative reading—in better writing, and in far more and better speaking. But after all, enveloping and enspiriting all, the semester's work was initiated and shared by all involved—a bona fide student project.

In the spring of 1916, we had, given: the Old Testament stories, the Greek myths, the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*; to prove: that a class corresponding roughly to second-year high-school students could derive the benefits indicated in the preceding paragraph. Our students were the third-year classes in the junior division of the six-year Horace Mann High School for Girls, and were no doubt somewhat highly selected. However, the experiment is worth trying anywhere.

The poor Old Testament has been well-nigh emasculated for everybody by pietistic drivel. Its human, gripping old masterpieces of elemental feeling and finished literary art have little chance to come home to the average child. If only we might handle an unmoral and heathenish generation who could stumble into King Solomon's mines and the princely treasuries of the ancient Hebrew lore with the freshness of discovery! It is as Dr. Clark says: we have a "holy terror" of the Bible. Like the imbeciles in the cathedral, we have whitewashed a masterpiece. Another

such moralizing victory and, from the literary standpoint, we are ruined.

We Horace Manners tackled the Old Testament to discover ways and means by which it could be made to function socially. Our plan was to build two or three afternoon programs around the Hebrews and the Greeks, to be presented informally to parents, friends, and guests from other classes in the alumni room.

We began, all together, in class, upon the story of Joseph and his brothers. In groups we worked out the tale as a movie scenario and as a little play, and in the doing we assembled a wealth of materials from all available sources, comprehending knowledge of oriental scenery, geography, history, costumes, customs, and character. While we were thus beginning our explorations of what may be called, in the light of our ordinary treatment, the ruins of the biblical world, student teams or groups chose, from a list of possible readings, some twenty to be explored, and presented them to the remainder of the class, with a view to selecting whatever might prove humorous, picturesque, entertaining, moving, or otherwise available for our projected afternoon.

The discovery of pictorial materials to illustrate the story of Joseph led to the appointment of a committee on biblical art, and this suggested a committee on biblical music. These groups set vigorously to work, with suggestions from any member of the class who could offer them, and with surprisingly rich results, as we discovered when we assembled our final program.

The class work moved rapidly through a wide variety of Old Testament stories, with interesting and ingenious presentations. Some of the tales were merely read aloud, some were partly told and cleverly condensed to effective climaxes, which were read or recited in the matchless words of the King James Version, and some were dramatized. Frequently poems which have grown out of the original narratives were recited along with the presentation of the biblical account. For example, in connection with the Saul stories, fragments of Browning's "Saul" and Byron's splendid, colorful Hebrew melodies—"The Harp the Monarch Minstrel Swept," "Saul," and "The Song of Saul before His Last Battle"—were distinctly illuminating and vivifying. In other connections

came Byron's "Belshazzar's Vision" and "Jephthah's Daughter," and Miltonic fragments. Here were good reading, good listening, good thinking, and oral composition, spontaneous and rich—criticism of the content and presentation of the stories, vigorous, pioneering suggestions, and detailed reports on uses to which the material might be turned in our project of a social afternoon. There were numerous short and vital bits of writing. Arrangements of scenari and sketches of plays with fragments of dialogue, themes projecting biblical characters into modern situations, letters by the social, art, and music committees furnished legitimate motives and readable results. We kept a watch for effects of the Bible on modern life and reaped a rich harvest for discussion and themes, as well as for exhibit, in the style of great men, references and quotations in important speeches, titles of books and magazine articles, newspaper clippings, cartoons, even advertisements.

Meanwhile the art, music, and social committees went ahunting for resources in their spheres. In the field of biblical art we stumbled upon gold mines on all sides. From Newark, New Jersey, John Cotton Dana, an incomparable public librarian, sent out of his collection of several thousand biblical pictures hundreds bearing upon our work. The New York Public Library suggested others, the Metropolitan Museum of Fine Arts provided post card reproductions of some of its finest Old Testament art treasures, Underwood and Underwood and William Walter Smith, on Fifth Avenue, rented us slides and we collected some fine things through the catalogues of the regular dealers in educational prints. These pictures were used to illustrate the class presentations of stories, and half a dozen of the really great ones, such as photographs of Michelangelo's "Moses" and "David," or details of Sargent's "Prophets" were worked into the final program.

Similarly the music committee sifted its resources, to find available suggestions of the great themes out of the Old Testament—"The Creation," "Samson and Delilah," the "Elijah," and some of the Isaiah prophecies from "The Messiah," as well as fugitive fragments representing some of mankind's richest melody. The social committee, among other things, assembled books which have, through the ages taken their inspiration from the Bible, old

Thomas à Kempis, *The Other Wise Man*, by van Dyke, *The Song of Our Syrian Guest*, *The Pilgrim's Progress*, *The Inside of the Cup*—there were a score or two of them when the day of our program arrived, a motley collection of them only hinting at the thousands more springing from the same source.

In short when the time came we felt that we had a fairly rich offering for our guests. It was well that we had, for the alumni room was packed to its doors and beyond. Girls dressed in biblical costumes, evolved by the art and household arts departments, conducted parents and friends to seats. Several hundred biblical pictures decorated the walls, and our collection of books was piled upon tables at the rear of the room for casual inspection. The representative of the social committee explained briefly the character of the day's entertainment and touched upon the manifold ways in which the ancient Hebrew writings are functioning in the world's best life today. A unique feature of the program was a brief and charming address on the Holy Land, by Dr. Philip Khuri Hitti, a Syrian gentleman, born and reared upon the mountains of Lebanon. Professor Allan Abbott of Teachers College read an elemental, gripping old tale from the Old Testament with simplicity and power. Half a dozen of the girls then discussed as many masterpieces of the world's art, shown by the stereopticon. Biblical music, vocal, instrumental, and phonographic, was interspersed throughout the program, which closed with a brief playlet and a social hour.

Such a program may be varied widely to fit the resources available to a particular community, but one well worth while may be built up anywhere. Our treatment of the Greeks was, in general, similar, and need not be explained in detail.

To suggest the uniform courtesy and consideration with which our explorations were met, as well as to include some of the richest references, the following quotations are offered from letters received in response to inquiries by our committees. The first is an extract from a letter from H. M. Lydenburg, reference librarian of the New York Public Library, and deals with the Old Testament work:

Mr. Freidus, the chief of our Jewish division, suggests in the field of biblical art, the two titles following: Hurll, Miss Estelle May, *The Bible Beautiful*, a

History of Biblical Art, Boston, L. C. Page & Co.; Smith, Rev. William Walter, *A Complete Handbook of Religious Pictures*, compiled for the New York Sunday School Commission, 29 Lafayette Place. He adds that *Ost und West, Illustrierte Monatsschrift*, published at Berlin since 1901, frequently contains articles on art relating to biblical subjects, and he suggests that Rev. George Zepin, of the Hebrew Theological College, Cincinnati, Ohio, who has been collecting material on this subject for years, and Dr. Daniel A. Huebsch, 791 Lexington Avenue, New York City, who has been lecturing on the Old Testament and art, may be of help.

The second quotation, selected from many kind and inspiring ones, deals with helps in teaching the Greek myths, the *Iliad*, and the *Odyssey*. Our committee read, in the *Woman's Home Companion* for January, February, March, April, and May, 1915, a series of delicate and luminous treatments of "The World's Greatest Myths," by Laura Spencer Portor, and sought her help, to learn by what means she secured the golden key, which is so evidently hers, to "the realms of gold." Her letter, a fragment of which is quoted, is helpful as it deals both with the letter and with the spirit of the way:

Though I believe I know the field pretty well, there are hardly any books I can point to which, it seems to me, give any idea of the beauty and meaning of the old myths. The books I think from which I, myself, have gotten the most satisfactory help are Pater's *Greek Studies*, Ruskin's *Queen of the Air*, as well as other chapters and references of Ruskin's on mythology, some of Max Müller's writings, particularly his essay on *Comparative Mythology*, the first chapter or two, or Symond's *Greek Poets*, and a book by Tito Vignoli called *Myth and Science*. Besides this, I think it helps immensely to read all that one can find, that is good, about Greece. I have found Mahaffy very helpful, and there is a book by von Mach which is also helpful.

As to just how to deal with the myths, it has always seemed to me best to try to get the folk to really love the Greeks, and to think of Greek mythology just as one of the many beautiful expressions of these wonderful and lovable people. I wonder if you know the work of Saint-Beuve as I do. It seems to me that his method of bringing before the people a vivid picture of certain great men or certain great times is so adequate and so beautiful. . . . It seems to me that mythology must be presented in some such manner as this—from the heart, by one who really loves it and reverences it.

I sometimes think my own love of Greek sculpture and Plutarch's *Lives* has done more to make me love Greek mythology than one hundred textbooks could have done, because both of these have taught me to love so intimately the Greeks themselves.

This was the spirit, we found invariably, with which we were met when we adventured upon the correlation of literature with the fine arts. The human returns in such contacts as these are worth in themselves months of the classroom grind—indeed, their ultimate values are incalculable!

For possible suggestion and aid, a partial list of further reference works is appended:

For the Bible study: Taylor's *Ancient Ideals*, Vol. I; Rawlinson's *Five Great Monarchies of the Ancient World* (for Babylonian sources of biblical accounts of the flood and other ancient stories); Abbott's *The Bible as Literature*; Hunting's *The Story of Our Bible*; Driver's *Literature of the Old Testament*.

For the Greek studies: Taylor's *Ancient Ideals* (especially good in the treatment of Greek idealism as represented in the characters of Achilles, Nestor, Ulysses, and others), Vol. I; *Crete, the Forerunner of Greece*; of course the *Age of Fable* by Bulfinch, Gayley's *Classic Myths* (valuable for correlated poetry of later ages), and Guerber's *Myths of Greece and Rome*; of course, too, Smith's *Classical Dictionary* and Baker's *Stories of Greece and Rome*. A good method of teaching the *Odyssey*, for children of the age here suggested, is to read through its story very rapidly and present, in connection with it, Stephen Phillips' poetic drama *Ulysses*.